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## The identity and role of the mother in late nineteenth century fiction by women

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**The identity and role of the mother in late nineteenth century fiction by women**

by

**Meredith Smith-Lane**

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

**MASTER OF ARTS**

Major: English (Literature)

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The student author, whose presentation of the scholarship herein was approved by the program of study committee, is solely responsible for the content of this thesis. The Graduate College will ensure this thesis is globally accessible and will not permit alterations after a degree is conferred.

Iowa State University

Ames, Iowa

2019

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**ABSTRACT**

This analysis explores the shifting identity and role of the mother in fiction by American women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. First-wave feminism created tension between the new ways in which women saw themselves and their opportunities beyond home and marriage, and the traditions of a social arrangement which was slow to catch up with these changes. To explore the scope of this tension, I focus my analysis on a variety of female-authored texts: “The Giant Wisteria” and “The Yellow Wall-Paper” by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The House of Mirth* by Edith Wharton, the play *The Verge* by Susan Glaspell, and “The Heath Death of the Universe” by Pamela Zoline. The works by Gilman and Wharton, penned at the turn of the century, provide contemporary critique of family power dynamics and the role of the mother in shaping family attitudes and beliefs, with the potential to do so either in a way that empowers other women, or in a way that polices them, reinforcing oppression. Glaspell and Zoline revisit the storyline of Gilman’s “The Yellow Wall-Paper” in their works from 1921 and 1967 respectively, repurposing her narrative to reflect the concerns and tensions of their day, and focusing particularly on the ways a mother might engage intellectually or creatively—or be prevented from doing so—other than producing children. All of these works are united in their focus on the mother as a figure at a crossroads, and a potential agent for change.

## CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

The final years of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth were a time of shifting attitudes and new opportunities for American women. The fight for women's suffrage and equality with men gave rise to a new generation of female writers concerned with the roles of women within the existing social system, and the potential for change in how that role was enacted and received. Engal observes that “around mid-century, the women's movement, which grew steadily in strength and influence, began to reshape novels—at least, those written about white, middle-class Northern women” (255).

But while the literary landscape provided a platform for women to write about their experiences, concerns, and hopes, the translation of those experiences into practice was—and remains—rocky. Duneer notes of the years following the turn of the century that “Although the feminist movement was opening more doors for women to actively pursue their creative endeavors outside the home, patriarchal definitions of womanhood were slow to change” (42).

The concerns and challenges of characters who are mothers provide a specific focus for this analysis. The texts I consider are primarily written by women from the *fin-de-siècle* era, but also include examples from the early- to mid-twentieth century which echo and, in some cases, replay/reinvent the themes and storylines of the earlier works.

Because these female writers attended closely to the plights of women and mothers specifically within their own social subsets, it is of note that their works cannot be said to be of universal significance for all American women of this time period. Therefore, this analysis is necessarily limited to the discussion of the issues pertinent to the writers of these works and their intended audiences: specifically, white, middle-to-upper-class, educated,

heterosexual, married women. While this might render the works discussed in this analysis of limited relevance to valid academic conversations centering on race or economic privilege, all nevertheless deal with the very real issues of identity faced by mothers emerging from the shadow of patriarchy to find their footing in the fight for equality, reconfiguring their role as “mother.”

In Chapter 2, I focus on the gendered power dynamic within familial relationships as represented in Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s Gothic short story “The Giant Wisteria.” Gilman uses the Gothic mode to anchor her turn-of-the-century world in the oppressive, patriarchal past, inviting comparison: how far women and men have come along the path to equality, and how far they still have to go. I argue that Gilman critiques the white middle-class family unit as a structure that both oppresses women and conceals that oppression in silence. Li-Wen Chang notes of Gilman that “In her perspective, women’s emancipation starts from their entry into the public realm, in their evolution from sex-objects to productive members in an organic unity.” Although she implicates women as complicit in their own oppression, Gilman also makes a case for mothers to become agents of change within the structure of the family unit.

The family unit as social building block is the focus of Chapter 3. In my analysis of mothers and children in Edith Wharton’s novel *The House of Mirth*, I examine the life of tragic New York socialite Lily Bart, and how she fits into the high-society ideal of conspicuous consumption—or fails to fit. Lily’s own mother represents both victim and perpetrator of oppression, but contrasting mother figures exist within the system: specifically, the “love match” marriage of Lawrence Selden’s parents, divorced single mother Carry Fisher and working-class Nettie Struther. Lily’s high-society New York world

is built on calculated moves and marriage alliances designed to maximize wealth and financial gain: marriage as a business model. I argue that Wharton's novel problematizes this system by showing the alternatives to it, and how family units built on genuine human connection rather than economic gain might undermine this system and empower women.

In Chapter 4, I examine the ways in which the concerns and themes of these turn-of-the-century women writers have been perpetuated, revisited, and complicated by female writers beyond the scope of the late nineteenth century. The famous narrative of Gilman's frequently-anthologized short story "The Yellow Wall-paper"—with its focus on a mother in a domestic prison and her eventual mental disintegration—is revisited in Susan Glaspell's 1921 play *The Verge* and Pamela Zoline's 1967 short story "The Heat Death of the Universe." This analysis shifts the focus to mothers who also aspire to produce intellectual or artistic work, and the challenges they face in reconciling their dual identities as producers of children and producers of ideas: women who aspire "to break through the boundaries of gendered conceptions of what a woman can be, but even more than demonstrating her right to pursue her art, her goal is to be taken seriously as an artist" (Duneer 43). In their reimagining of Gilman's beset female artist, Glaspell and Zoline bring the character of the creative mother forward into the twentieth century and create a vehicle to consider what advancements were made in the name of equality in the intervening years, as well as what changes might still exist for women in general and mothers in particular.

The study of these texts allows examination of "the fraught relationship between middle-class women in fin-de-siècle America and the spaces they inhabit"—whether those spaces are physical, intellectual, or social (Downey 120). These spaces contain a number of seeming contradictions. Men are represented as oppressors, but often also benign, caring, and



outwardly supportive of their wives. Women are represented as oppressed, but are often complicit in their own situations or engage in the policing of other women. I argue that these works represent a way to understand the difficulty of breaking out of a controlling, established system of social gender roles and beliefs about those roles, particularly the role of the wife and mother.

## **CHAPTER 2. THE MOTHER'S OVERGROWN GARDEN: POWER DYNAMICS OF THE FAMILY IN "THE GIANT WISTERIA"**

### **Introduction**

In Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 1891 short story "The Giant Wisteria," a trio of young couples on holiday at an old vine-covered New England house unearth a ghost story dating to America's dark colonial and patriarchal past. What reads as a simple creepy tale reveals, upon closer scrutiny, the means to critique the white American middle-class family unit. Gilman uses the Gothic framework and tropes—wild abandoned gardens, ghostly sightings, and bodies in the cellar—to interrogate the gendered power dynamic between both husbands and wives, and between mothers and children. The family's patriarchal structure not only oppresses women, but breaks down the family unit, and conceals all evidence. I will argue that Gilman makes a case for women as complicit in their own oppression, but also as possessing the power and agency to work for change within the gendered sphere of the home and in society, with emphasis on the role of the mother in engendering this change.

### **Puritans and Holidaymakers**

Gilman's story presents two narratives, connected by the huge wisteria plant of the title and the place—an old New England house—where both play out. The story begins with a short account of the Puritan Dwining family. The daughter has had a child out of wedlock. Horrified and eager to protect the family name from disgrace, her parents arrange to return to England, where she will wed a distasteful cousin, making "an honest woman of her" (Gilman 388). On the eve of their departure, the girl and her mother tend the wisteria, which the father has brought to the mother from England—a transplanted, non-native plant, which nevertheless "groweth well" in its new home in American soil (Gilman 388). The girl, toying

with the carnelian cross necklace she wears, pleads with her mother to be permitted to see the child. Her mother hushes her, and her father, overhearing her request, orders her locked in her room by a servant, and threatens to “have thee bound” if she emerges again (Gilman 388). The young woman does not speak or act again in the story, appearing only once more “overhead” as “a white face among the leaves, with eyes of wasted fire,” listening as her parents discuss their plans for her future on the porch where the wisteria vine grows (Gilman 388). The direct narration of the family’s story ends with this scene, its continuation and ultimate resolution only implied.

The second, longer portion of the story introduces us to the young contemporary woman Jenny and her “indulgent” husband George (Gilman 388). Searching for a place to spend the summer, the couple happens upon an “old mansion” (Gilman 389). Jenny takes immediately to the crumbling New England home, romantically hoping that it houses ghostly experiences and hauntings. The local woman who oversees the house for the absentee European owners, Mrs. Pepperill, informs them that the house has not been inhabited in recent memory. Rent of the house for the summer is quickly arranged through a lawyer. Jenny and George, along with their respective “pretty sisters” Susy and Kate, and the sisters’ significant others Jack and Jim (in one case, a husband, and in the other, a fiancé) take up residence (Gilman 389).

At first nothing seems amiss to the young couples, though Gilman takes care to connect the contemporary narrative subtly to the earlier one: through the wisteria vine, now grown to gigantic size in the absence of a tending gardener, which still climbs the porch and even infiltrates the structure of the house itself; and through the presence of a “rickety cradle” in the attic, which the couples explore (Gilman 389). Things soon take a ghostly turn:

chains rattle in the cellar at night, and a mysterious, spectral woman appears to two of the men. Investigation the next morning culminates in the discovery of two corpses: a skeleton in the roots of the wisteria (exposed by workmen hired to repair the porch's structural damage after years of neglect), and the body of an infant down the well in the cellar. The skeleton wears a carnelian cross necklace, making it clear that the end of the young Puritan woman's story has, after many years, been revealed.

That story's details, however, remain a mystery. Gilman never explicitly explains how the young woman and her infant come to be dead in the cellar of the family's home. She gives the story's ending, but not the story itself. It can be inferred that the father's plan to return to England somehow ran amok, but the details of what happened are never made clear. This ambiguity invites several possible interpretations of the events that transpired.

One interpretation—hinted by one of the young men's sighting of “a female ghost...all wrapped up in a shawl, and [with] a big bundle under her arm...[gliding] to a dark old bureau, and seemed taking things from the drawers”—is that the young woman tried to escape with her infant, but failed (Gilman 391). From here, the variables compound: was she caught and imprisoned in the cellar by her father, the infant drowned, or was her intended “escape” the release of suicide? How did she escape her locked room? Gilman provides physical evidence of tragedy, but without the details to formulate the crime—if, indeed, a crime occurred. The young woman's body must serve as its own storyteller, and it is silent.

While the mystery entices and invites speculation, it must be asked whether ambiguity is not, in fact, the point. Though discovered by outsiders, the bodies in the cellar will prove a surprise to longtime area residents as well, because the house's history is not known to the locals. Jenny admits that “I pumped poor Mrs. Pepperill for three days, but

could get nothing out of her. But I'm convinced there is a story, if only we could find it" (Gilman 389). None of the local inhabitants know these events transpired. The young couples find a story that is less the tantalizing ghost story for which Jenny hopes, but a narrative of enforced silence.

### **Gilman's Gothic Elements**

Charles L. Crow notes that "the Gothic is a literature of oppression" (2). Ghosts and haunted houses frighten and entice readers, but also remain as markers of buried ills and tragic events. Kathy A. Fedorko characterizes Edith Wharton's Gothic fictional elements as representing "the psychic struggle between female sexuality and autonomy and male attempts to suppress it" (22). The same might be said of "The Giant Wisteria," but here the waters are more muddled.

Andrew Smith, in his introduction to *Gothic Literature*, notes that the Gothic does not "passively replicate contemporary cultural debates about politics, philosophy, or gender, but rather rewords, develops, and challenges them. Gothic is a mode which searches for new ways of representing complex ideas or debates, and it is therefore not coincidental that the form has so often appealed to women writers"—among them, Wharton, Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, and others who questioned patriarchal institutions during this time period (8). Gilman is known for her contribution to the conversation surrounding female autonomy and patriarchal control, most famously in her 1892 short story (and another Gothic tale), "The Yellow Wall-Paper."

The idea of place is central in "The Giant Wisteria." Indeed, the notion of a haunted space unifies the two narratives. Gothic tales traditionally take place in spaces that have existed since antiquity. In European Gothic, this often took the form of castles, crypts, ruins,

or graveyards. American Gothic tales extended the idea of haunted space to wild, foreboding natural settings resistant to human control (Keetley and Sivils 7). And the Gothic trope of the “haunted house” appears in Gilman’s story—albeit a haunted house with a feminist bent.

Dara Downey comments on the nature of the home in “The Giant Wisteria,” noting its focus on “the abusive nature of domestic space and ideology, figuring the home and the behavior it prescribed as actively injurious, not only to middle-class women, but to American society at large” (120). Indeed, Gilman is not the only female author in *fin-de-siècle* America to portray the home as a domestic trap and a patriarchal space, paradoxically presided over by the perfect mother, the “angel of the house.” In “The Giant Wisteria,” this “myth of idealized nineteenth-century domesticity, and its attendant policing of sexuality and motherhood, is portrayed as a murderous force, determining and ultimately destroying the lives of those forced to conform to it” (Downey 120). The space of the home—in theory a place of comfort and security—becomes poisonous to those who live in it, and a place where terrible events occur, hidden behind the home’s walls and the veneer of respectability they provide.

### **The Mother’s Overgrown Garden**

In “The Giant Wisteria,” however, Gilman presents a different kind of haunted domestic space: the overgrown garden. A garden occupies a unique position, straddling the boundary between the home itself and the public sphere as a liminal space (Bilston 2). In his introduction to *American Gothic*, Crow notes that the sublime “...is not the beauty of a perfectly planned garden or symmetrical Neoclassical architecture, but that of a wild mountain panorama, for example, or of ancient ruins. The sublime replaces comfortable beauty with a beauty that mingles awe and even fear” (6).

This leads us to the idea of a Gothic garden. The wisteria itself is a garden plant—but, far from occupying a well-organized and carefully cultivated space, Gilman’s garden “...once beautiful with rare trees and shrubs, [is] now a gloomy wilderness of tangled shade” (389). Other non-native plants join the wisteria in making up this wilderness: “The old lilacs and laburnums, the spirea and syringa, nodded against the second-story windows. What garden plants survived were great ragged bushes or great shapeless beds” (Gilman 389). The garden, left to its own devices for several generations, has become a Gothic space.

The idea of the sublime—the sensation of mingled fear and beauty—is evident in the way that the characters interact with and react to the overgrown garden. Its wild and abandoned nature defies the expectation of a garden as an ordered place, turning a familiar setting into an unsettling space. Sitting on the porch in the evening, Susy urges the others to “Look at that group of trees out there in the long grass—it looks for all the world like a crouching, hunted figure!” (Gilman 389) She describes the wisteria itself as “a writhing body—cringing—beseeching!” (Gilman 390).

The men and women react to the overgrown plant life very differently. While the women see mysterious and tortured figures in the vines and tangles of the garden, the men reduce these appearances to the mundane. Jim notes of the trees that Susy finds so sinister, “It looks to me like a woman picking huckleberries” (390). The men persist in seeing images of the home and the status quo, such as a woman engaged in the traditionally female act of gathering food for the family, rather than the dark, ghostly suggestions the women intuit. To the men, the garden appears straightforward: flourishing plant life, a bit overgrown, perhaps, but nothing to inspire fear or awe. When the women admonish them, the young men cheerfully agree to play along: “‘We can! We will! We’ll be as ghostly as you please.’ And

forthwith they began to see bloodstains and crouching figures so plentifully that the most delightful shivers multiplied” (Gilman 390). This light banter masks a deeper observation: the women become aware more quickly than the men that all is not what it seems in this place. The men accept the house and its grounds at face value: the patriarchal threat represented by the garden does not threaten them. The Gothic garden plants as “markers of oppression” are, in this case, only visible to the oppressed (Sivils 173). The titular wisteria exhibits sinister qualities, but it must be noted that other plants also inhabit the garden and speak to the Gothic imaginations of the women. Many organisms comprise the garden, interweaving and interacting with each other, much in the same way that systems of oppression are mutually reinforcing. Sivils notes that “It is in the writing of American women at this time that we find a pronounced attention to the ways that the world of plants intersects with and informs a range of social ills that darken the human realm” (170). Gilman’s Gothic garden represents one example of this: the wisteria and its counterparts have taken route and flourished, much as the Old-World ideas of patriarchal control have done.

Bilston observes that “while gardening may be about appreciating the harmonious operation of Nature, it is also about wresting control for oneself, about stepping in and imposing human ideals of order and aestheticism” (6). A garden is a purposeful creation and requires a gardener to tend it. Before the home was abandoned, it may be assumed that the gardener was the Puritan mother, Mistress Dwining. She identifies the wisteria as “my new vine” in the first line of the story (Gilman 387). The lilacs, spirea, and other plants noted in the garden are likewise non-native species brought from England—colonizers of the natural landscape, and likely planted by the same family. As the mother traditionally oversees the day-to-day goings-on of the home, she also tends the garden. Under her hand, the wisteria



and its fellow garden plants thrive—but when she abandons the garden, they take over. The purposeful and controlled creation and tending of the garden is replaced by its rampant growth in the gardener’s absence.

### **Gilman and Her Audience**

Dialogue drives the action of “The Giant Wisteria,” focusing on the interactions between the young couples as they experience the ghostly events of the story. Indeed, none of these experiences except the final revelation of the bodies that ends the story are experienced in real time. Instead, the characters recount them to each other the following morning. This allows focus to fall on the way the young men and women engage with each other.

On surface examination, the couples have loving and easy relationships, with cheerful banter the most common conversational exchange. The young men provide a marked and welcome contrast to the stern, controlling Puritan father in the first portion of the narrative, who is described by his wife as “hard,” even to the point that he wishes his daughter drowned rather than to have her bring shame upon the family (Gilman 388). Upon closer look, however, a subtle hierarchy becomes clear, denoting darker undercurrents. The men constantly joke, often dismissing the women’s more intuitive observations about the house and its grounds. This continues until they are physically confronted with the two bodies in the cellar: something tangible that, unlike a ghost, they cannot dismiss. They treat the young women more as children to be looked after than as adults and equals, at times condescendingly, as when George refers to the women as “frisky creatures” when warning them to use the side door until the porch is repaired (390). The men—even though they are,

in general, sympathetically portrayed as “indulgent” and obviously loving husbands—consistently quiet, calm, discount, and otherwise silence the women throughout the story.

The women, for their part, are rendered as childlike. They defer to the men for action—taking the initiative in fixing the porch, for instance, or in the decision to investigate the cellar and bring up the bucket from the well. Jenny even reports cheerfully that she allows her husband to drug her after hearing the rattle of chains in the basement: “I woke George, and made such a fuss that he gave me bromide, and said he’d go and look, and that’s the last I thought of it till Jack reminded me—the bromide worked so well” (390). Her blithe acceptance of this practice—and of her subsequent memory lapse as a result—speak to the total reliance the young women have upon their husbands. Downey notes that Gilman subtly comments on “the reduction of turn-of-the-century womanhood to attractive commodities” when she refers to the young women as “fresh cambrics and pretty boots...gallantly escorted below” (125). The women are reduced to pretty, smiling paper dolls.

In his introduction to *History of the Gothic: American Gothic*, Crow writes that “In the United States, a belief in progress is almost an article of faith” (2). By setting her two narratives in two distinct epochs on the timeline of American history—early colonial times and her contemporary nineteenth-century world—Gilman questions the progress that has been made in how men and women interact. Certainly, the ideals of the Dwining family would have seemed quaint and old-fashioned in many ways to a contemporary audience—but, in juxtaposing these narratives, Gilman allows a comparison. In the first narrative of “The Giant Wisteria,” the young mother is kept in a forced childlike state by her parents, even though she has carried and given birth to a child herself. Their plan to return to England and force her into a “suitable” marriage, and to leave the child behind to be raised in the

village, would keep her in that child's role: a dutiful daughter. Her deviance from acceptable behavioral codes and attempt to claim womanhood on her own terms would be effectively erased in society's eyes (or at least concealed in the appearance of respectability). Whatever event transpired that left both woman and child dead in the cellar of the house signifies that she pushed back against relegation to the station of child—and paid the price of that choice, permanently silenced.

This young woman stands in direct contrast to Jenny, Susy, and Kate. None of the three young 1890s women are disobedient or rebellious—indeed, all three have committed to the patriarchal narrative and accepted its norms, as evidenced by their marital status (all are either already married or engaged) and by their deference to their husbands for action and problem solving. This female audience discovers the young women's body and unearths her partial story—but they have already embraced the forced childhood the young woman rejected. This raises the question of the narrative's impact and of its intended audience.

Gilman's fiction admittedly evidences limits in its consideration of a fairly narrow demographic: Egnal observes that “the idea of ‘separate spheres’ [as] a universal descriptor” for the social position of the nineteenth-century woman is flawed, and limited by necessity to “white, middle-class, heterosexual women, primarily living in the Northeast” (240). This is perhaps unsurprising, as Gilman herself came from this privileged background. She participated actively in the conversations surrounding first-wave feminism and women's suffrage, although, as Farr notes, Gilman held that “the basic need of economic independence seemed...of far more importance than the ballot” (qtd. 93). Gilman herself acknowledges the intended audience for the body of her work in the preface to her 1898 nonfiction work *Women and Economics*: “To reach in especial the thinking women of to-day, and urge them

upon a new sense, not only of their social responsibility of individuals, but of their measureless racial importance as makers of men” (vii). The final phrase, “makers of men,” is telling: Gilman held it of importance that a woman be both a thinking, autonomous individual and, if she chose, a mother. Her audience would have contained young women similar to those she portrays in “The Giant Wisteria,” whom she subtly urges, through her fiction, to reconsider their position within marriage and society. Gilman was aware of the power of well-written fiction to move people to action. Polly Wynn Allen reports Gilman’s diary entry from 1892: “If I can learn to write good stories it will be a powerful addition to my armory” (qtd. Farr 94). As the women’s movement picked up in the second half of the nineteenth century, the ideas inherent “fundamentally changed the way many authors depicted domesticity” (Egnal 240). Gilman, as one of these authors, wrote with a keen awareness of audience and a clear objective: to change the way both men and women considered the woman’s role in the home.

Gilman, perhaps surprisingly, was neither anti-marriage nor anti-motherhood. Farr notes that, rather than abolish the framework of the home and family, Gilman favored “the replacement of the sentimentalized idea of home with practical measures of reform” (93). Gilman wrote of these issues from personal experience: she herself married twice. Her first marriage to Charles Walter Stetson in 1884 ended in divorce. She moved to California with the couple’s young daughter, Katharine, in 1888, and produced an impressive body of literary work in short order. However, the stress of caring for her daughter as a single parent eventually prompted Gilman to send Katharine to live with her father and his new wife in a more stable household. Gilman felt that her former husband had equal right, ability, and capacity to raise their daughter (“From Woman to Human”). She received public criticism

for both this decision, and for her divorce (uncommon at the time) (Farr 98). Gilman married a second time, later in life, and held forth in her 1903 work of social theory, *The Home: Its Work and Influence*, that “People must marry. People ought to marry” (qtd. Farr 97). She lobbied not for the abolishment of the institution of marriage, but rather for its betterment, that both men and women might be free to contribute productively to society. Chang describes Gilman as one of the late nineteenth century’s “‘realistic dreamers’ who demolish the illusions in leading habits of thought and simultaneously project their dreams to a realm where human innate goodness prevails over habitual institutions.” Of Gilman, Farr notes that “Not only does restricting women to the home keep them from developing *their* potential, she believed, but also that of the child and husband” (94). When restrictions are lifted from women, everyone flourishes.

### **The Key and the Cellar**

This brings us to the representation of mothers and potential mothers in “The Giant Wisteria.” The representation of the Dwining family defies straightforward interpretation. “Ultimately, all Gothic stories are family stories”—if this assertion by Crow is true, it is instructive to examine the narrative that persists just beneath the surface of the story (15). It is logical to assert that the father is the girl’s chief oppressor: he arranges her marriage to her cousin, he makes threats, and it is ultimately his decision to leave the child behind. He also provides his wife with the wisteria plant.

This returns us to the wisteria. The mother, not the father, claims ownership and care for the vine. In the opening line of the story, the mother admonishes her daughter, “Meddle not with my new vine, child! See! Thou hast already broken the tender shoot!” (Gilman 387). Mother and daughter in this scene tend the vine together, but the daughter does it damage

(much as, with her deviant actions, she attempts to damage the patriarchal narrative controlling her life and choices). Her mother protects the vine from further harm. She guards the values of patriarchal control soon after. The daughter retires to her room and is locked in by “a hard-faced serving woman” who returns a few minutes later, to give the key to the mother—not the father, as one might expect (Gilman 388). Though the father makes the decisions, the mother enforces them, and serves as her daughter’s jailer. The serving woman also has charge of the girl’s infant, with the implication that she will take over permanent care of the child after the family’s departure. She therefore assists in the negation of the girl’s transgression. In many stories by female writers of this time period (including Gilman’s own “The Yellow Wall-paper,” in which the female narrator’s husband all but imprisons her in an upper room as part of a “rest cure”), men clearly act as oppressors. However, here Mistress Dwining exhibits “no pity” and holds possession of the key to her daughter’s room (Gilman 388). She chooses to reinforce the values represented by her husband rather than empower her daughter (and by extension, her grandchild)—in symbolic terms, to tend the vine of patriarchy.

The mother’s loyalties, however, are not as clear-cut as they seem. It is worth noting that the mother is not entirely without pity (an observation that her daughter makes just before she is sent to her chambers). In the ensuing conversation with her husband, Mistress Dwining tries to defend her daughter, observing that, “Thou art very hard, Samuel, art thou not afeared for her life? She grieveth sore for the child, aye, and for the green fields to walk in!” (Gilman 388). She voices her concern for her daughter’s welfare, even as her actions reinforce her imprisonment. Her husband dismisses this concern, holding that their decision

to leave is the best for all of them, to save the family name from disgrace and “hide the blot forever” (388).

Mistress Dwining gives a telling response to this: “An’ if she would not?” (Gilman 388). She reminds her husband that the power to keep the dark family secret lies not solely within his power to hide by action, but also within his daughter’s power to reveal by speaking. The father again dismisses her concerns, holding their current course of action as the only viable option. The exchange ends there, as does the account of the Dwining family’s narrative.

The question remains, however, of how the young woman came to escape from her room that night with her mother holding the key. We must consider how the impact of the story changes if, as it may be speculated, Mistress Dwining provided her daughter with the key, granting her a chance to escape with the child. The failure of the escape plan secures the end of the family line, with both daughter and grandchild dead. It is no accident, perhaps, that Gilman gave the family the last name of Dwining, from a dialectical term “dwine,” meaning “to languish” or “to disappear.” Heirs to the family name destroyed, the family does indeed disappear, leaving only their crumbling home and garden—soon to become a tangled wilderness without a gardener to check its rampant growth—to mark their presence in America.

The Dwining family’s past finally emerges to the audience of not one, but three young women, an authorial choice which bears examination. This could easily have been the story of only George and Jenny, the couple who discovers the old house. Instead, however, Gilman chooses to unite the three young women as protagonists. Their husbands, however well-meaning, stand squarely in the way of the discovery of the truth until it becomes

impossible to ignore. Once having divulged the secrets of the cellar, the men find their station changed somewhat: "...the story equally positions the menfolk as profoundly rattled by the very thing they hitherto refused to accept. Their status as arbiters of knowledge is...destabilized" (Downey 125). Even unconsciously, the men try until the very end of the story to leave the evidence of the patriarchy's past darkness buried. Jenny, Kate, and Susy are yet not mothers, but are nevertheless part of the system of marriage, and represent potential mothers. As such, the implications of the Dwining family women's story hold import for them.

Crow notes that "If the national myth [of America] was of equality," the Gothic could prove useful in undermining that myth, and provide a dissenting dialogue, addressing dark undercurrents—including "sexual difference [as]...a source of fear" in the 1890s (2). These undercurrents pervade "The Giant Wisteria," as the interactions between the women and men demonstrate. Even in happy, loving couples, a power differential exists. By calling attention to this, the story exposes not only Dwining family secrets, but less-obvious societal darkness as well. In the 1890s, the women's suffrage movement was in full swing, and women's rights groups regularly demonstrated in the United States. While some men supported women's right to equality, many men felt threatened by the idea of women as equals. Although no mention is made of George, Jack, and Jim's political leanings, their actions indicate that, at a household level, women's position has not changed as much as might be expected since the Dwining family inhabited the home, and that the men see no rush to elevate women to the status of equals.

The young woman makes a telling appeal to Mistress Dwining before being sent to her room: "Art thou a mother, and hast no pity on me, a mother?" (Gilman 388) With this



question, Gilman returns to the heart of the matter. Women—though, at this time, legally subordinate to men—possessed the choice to be complicit in their own sex's oppression. Recognizing the commonalities between mother and daughter, woman and woman, allows them to empower each other and more effectively balance the power differential of the family unit—a struggle that persists to the present day. The institutions of the patriarchy continue to thrive, and, like the three young couples laughing and dining under the wisteria's vegetation on the porch, we continue to interact with them daily. Without cooperation, Gilman implies, not only can real change never be enacted, but the family unit will disappear, lost in the vines of the overgrown garden.

**CHAPTER 3. THE FAMILY BUSINESS MODEL: MOTHERS AND CHILDREN  
IN *THE HOUSE OF MIRTH***

**Introduction**

Edith Wharton's 1905 novel *The House of Mirth* follows the story of Lily Bart, a young woman raised among New York's elite at the turn of the century. Lily has been groomed from childhood to marry well but has fallen upon hard times after her family's bankruptcy and the subsequent death of her parents. She navigates the social minefield of upper-crust New York society, wavering between the social need to marry a wealthy husband to maintain her tenuous station in that upper crust, and her own idealistic, romanticized disgust at doing so. Lily "would not indeed have cared to marry a man who was merely rich" (33). She acknowledges mutual feelings of affection between herself and bachelor Lawrence Selden, but both know that he is not wealthy enough to be what Lily considers a suitable match for herself. As she wavers between her need to marry well and her aversion to doing so, Wharton examines both potential outcomes, balancing "regret that Lily has muffed a chance to establish herself, and pleasure that she has not sold herself" (Wasserman 147). Lily spirals lower in the social order as the novel progresses, falling from charming houseguest to social secretary for "new money" to eventually finding work in a millinery shop. She dies at the novel's end after overdosing on chloral.

As Lily flits from party to weekend visit to yacht tour, we meet many husband-and-wife sets, many potential family units, but very few of these upper-class couples have children (or at least, children who figure into the storyline). It is mentioned offhand that the divorced Carry Fisher has a child, but her daughter appears only once in the novel. The only other child that makes an appearance is Nettie Sturthevant's baby, at the end, who is of a

different social class, and therefore outside the enclosing social system in which Lily lives. Nettie meets Lily, whom she knows slightly from Lily's earlier peripheral involvement in a working girls' club that Nettie attended, on the street and invites her into her home, where Lily sees a far-different picture of motherhood than that to which she is accustomed.

The other mothers discussed at length are Lily's and Selden's mothers, both of whom are deceased. Lily's mother buys into the idea of commodification of beauty for capital gain and social advantage, with the beauty in question being her daughter's. The men provide capital, the women consume it, and by extension, New York's elite set consumes them (in their public displays of finery). The creation of a domestic sphere is merely a way to succeed in the social one. Through an examination of the mothers and children (or absence of children) portrayed in Wharton's novel, I argue that the family unit represents the potential for change in a corrupt social system of confining roles for both men and women, when marriage alliances are based on genuine human connection rather than financial gain.

### **Lily's Family**

In the upper-class society of *The House of Mirth*, beauty is a commodity that can be bought. The family unit and its members are likewise made into commodities. Early in *The House of Mirth*, we learn that Lily's mother headed her childhood family. Mrs. Bart "was famous for the unlimited effect she produced on limited means" and had great ambitions for her daughter's marriageability (Wharton 31). Lily's mother's influence is the dominant force in her rearing. Her father, whom she "seemed always to have seen...through a blur—first of sleepiness, then of distance and indifference" is a secondary "blurry" figure, spending his days earning the money to support his wife's social needs—important to the family chiefly as provider of resources (35). Lily comes from a family that, while "of limited means," were

nevertheless accepted into New York high society, ran with a rich crowd, and aspired to be upwardly mobile. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, a contemporary of Wharton's, notes in "Women and Economics" that "Speaking collectively, men produce and distribute wealth; and women receive it at their hands...the economic status of the human race...is governed mainly by the activities of the male; the female obtains her share in the racial advance only through him" (318). Upper class women must marry well to take their share in the goods of commerce, to be sure, but they are not without a specific role of their own.

In this novel, money is portrayed as the lifeblood of the upper-class family unit. The lack of it destroys the family unit or prevents it from forming. Thorstein Veblen notes in "Conspicuous Leisure and Conspicuous Consumption" that "[Women's] sphere is within the household, which she should 'beautify' and of which she should be the 'chief ornament'" (299). This idea describes Lily's mother's own attitude toward the keeping of the house, and the maintenance of her daughter as another "ornament." Lily's father's health is spent maintaining and securing their financial security. When the finances falter, so does he, and he dies shortly after declaring bankruptcy. The family's possessions are sold at auction, and Lily and her mother drift from the hospitality of one relative or acquaintance to another, "now paying long visits to relations whose house-keeping Mrs. Bart criticized...and now vegetating in cheap continental refuges, where Mrs. Bart held herself fiercely aloof from the frugal tea-tables of her companions in misfortune" (32). Lily's mother doesn't last long after their monetary wealth dwindles: after "two years of hungry roaming, Mrs. Bart...died of a deep disgust" (33). It is of note that she dies of "disgust" rather than a discernable medical illness or ailment: she is drained, consumed, and exhausted by the system and the façade of keeping up the appearance of wealth, as well as repulsed by their poverty. Mrs. Bart

maintains her loyalty to her class status—and her snobbery—until the very end. Her deathbed charge to Lily urges her to continue to seek her fortune: to “fight your way out of it somehow” (34). The “it” to which she refers is the “dinginess” into which she and Lily have descended at the loss of their income (36). Mrs. Bart’s charge condemns not only her dead husband, who failed them by failing to provide sufficient resources, but also her (and, by extension, Lily’s) failure to succeed within the economic system of their social set as well. The Bart family unit can be viewed as a failed business venture. Mrs. Bart is too deeply embedded in the system to see or critique it. Lily, it seems, wishes to transcend the economics of high society at times, but is likewise unable to do so. There is to be no “fighting her way out” (either of “dinginess” or the social system in general)—though, like her mother, she plays the game all the way to the end.

Lily’s sentimental disposition is tempered by her mother’s strict training on what and who should be obtained and how one should obtain them. Part of that training includes Mrs. Bart’s strict warning “against love matches” (36). Mrs. Bart makes it clear to Lily that her own marriage to Lily’s father was *not* such a match (36). Lily then, was brought up in a home with the model for marriage and family being a “business model” of sorts, rather than one based on love, affection, or respect for the other members of the household. Lily is “secretly ashamed of her mother’s crude passion for money,” but in reality, shares it, albeit idealized as a longing for all the lovely things and experiences that money can buy and provide, rather than for money itself (37). This denial of her own participation in the system runs deep; even in acknowledging her own teenage fantasy of choosing between “an English nobleman with political ambitions and vast estates; or, for second choice, an Italian prince with a castle in the Apennines and a hereditary office in the Vatican,” as naïve, she compares the husbands to

possessions, citing her ambitions as “hardly more futile and childish than the earlier ones which had centered about the possession of a French jointed doll with real hair” (37). Yet the “childish” ambitions eventually translate into adult ones: Lily’s ideal husband remains one who is both wealthy and beautiful: a fine possession, like a French doll, and one who has no negative qualities to interfere with his potential (unlike potential suitors Percy Gryce, whom she finds dull, and Simon Rosedale, who is coarse and unrefined). Even in her idealism and self-critique (such as it is), Lily cannot divorce herself from the idea of people as commodity: as Dimock notes, she is “clearly caught up in the ethos of exchange” (362).

Unlike her mother, Lily seems to be aware of the system in which she exists as consuming and unjust, but she is just as unable to break its constraints as her parents. When her idealism wavers (as it does at several junctures in the book, often when she needs money to pay a bill), she falls back on her mother’s “training:” that “beauty is the raw material of conquest” and her own physical beauty is her last chance: the “last asset in their fortunes, the nucleus around which their life was to be rebuilt” (36). Lily buys into this in action, if not in belief. She spends the bulk of the book “marketing herself...worried only about the price she would fetch” (Dimock 356).

### **Selden’s Family**

Lawrence Selden’s mother is described much differently than Lily’s, though it seems that the two families’ financial circumstances are comparable. Both have secured a place on the edge of high society on “limited means.” Selden’s childhood home is described as “an atmosphere where restricted means were felt only as a check on aimless profusion, where the few possessions were so good that their rarity gave them a merited relief, and abstinence was combined with elegance in a way exemplified by Mrs. Selden’s knack of wearing her old

velvet as if it were new.” Outwardly, this brings to mind the way Mrs. Bart is portrayed: a woman who is able to efficiently manage her husband’s capital. The dynamic of the family unit itself, however, is described much differently. Unlike the transactional marriage of the Barts, the Seldens are portrayed as having genuine affection for each other. Mr. Selden is described as “the kind of man who delights in a charming woman: who quotes her, stimulates her, and keeps her perpetually charming” (133). This indicates an attention to the wife herself, not merely to what she can provide as the one who might “promote” his wealth. This is a reversal of the mutually draining relationship that Lily’s parents shared: Mrs. Bart consumed the financial resources Mr. Bart provided, while Mr. Bart benefited socially from his wife’s management of their capital. The Seldens espouse a satisfaction at living comfortably with less, which contrasts mightily to Mrs. Bart’s deep-seated hatred of all forms of “dinginess.” This key difference in family dynamic and upbringing allows us to consider the divergent ways in which the families’ respective offspring navigate the social landscape.

Both Selden and Lily have experienced what passes for “poverty” to their social set. It is noted that “before Selden left college he had learned that there were as many different ways of going without money as of spending it” (133). Coulombe observes that Selden fits the description of what “Martha Banta, in her study of gender images in America, calls ‘threshold men.’ She explains that ‘threshold men’ fit no precise classification, enjoy no special space, and remain on the margins of society in a transitional state” (qtd. 4). It is noted that “Selden senior had an eye for a picture, his wife an understanding of old lace” (133). This implies that Selden is brought up to value not simply fine things, but fine things that are valuable in ways beyond the financial: to recognize the value of art, ideas, and beauty for

their own sake. His familial upbringing instills in him the idea of “a love which should broaden and deepen till it became the central fact of life” (134). This belief is one aspect of this complicated character—who Wharton herself termed a “negative hero”—that keeps him on the fringes of the social set both he and Lily navigate (Coulombe 3).

The central fact of Lily’s life, however, is certainly not love or beauty, though she might wish it to be: it is the need to find a wealthy husband. Lily could marry Selden and be “comfortable” (and she even concedes this at times) but perceives that this would not be a match with which she would be happy. Despite mutual attraction, Selden is not wealthy enough for Lily’s high aspirations, and they both know this. Coulombe notes that “Selden would stand more to lose than Lily by marrying. While she would escape from many social restrictions, he would lose much of his freedom” (6). As a “threshold” bachelor, he is free to attend the parties as he pleases and enjoy the benefits of being a houseguest of the upper class, including an affair with Bertha Dorset. Though he outwardly disdains the pursuit of money for money’s sake, he still participates in society rather than renouncing it altogether. In this way, he is like Lily: both choose to remain involved in the game, and to ignore the possibility of building a family unit based on anything other than economics. Though this possibility is open to them, both yield to the social pressures and expectations of their peers. Even those who might choose a marriage based on love are tempered by the power of the system to choose differently.

### **Carry Fisher’s Daughter**

Children are rarely seen in *The House of Mirth*. Familial love takes last priority to business and social survival. Therefore, it is valuable to observe the occasions when children are presented. One notable scene takes place in Book II, Chapter VI. In this scene, Lily is



invited to visit Carry Fisher in the small house that Mrs. Fisher is renting for the season in Tuxedo. This visit takes place shortly after Lily has fallen out of favor with their social set due to rumors circulated by Bertha Dorset. Lily comes upon her erstwhile suitor Simon Rosedale interacting with Carry Fisher's young daughter at the fire, and stops to watch them unobserved. Her reactions to this domestic scene are of note because they directly reflect her upbringing, and her mother's focus on money rather than familial bonds serves as a source of disconnect.

Carry Fisher is an intriguing character because she does not fit neatly into the social order. As a two-time divorcee, Mrs. Fisher is no longer of an age and social station where she can use her beauty as a means for advancement and financial survival. As a "fallen" member of the upper class, Mrs. Fisher has turned to soliciting pay by acting as a social manager of sorts for the elite set. This is looked down upon by many members of the upper crust, but some see her as a necessary evil, and are somewhat sympathetic. Wealthy Judy Trenor, talking with Lily about a party early in the novel, says, "As if one could help having Carry Fisher! It *was* foolish of her to get the second divorce—Carry always overdoes things—but she said the only way to get a penny out of Fisher was to divorce him and make him pay alimony. And poor Carry has to consider every dollar" (38). Like Lawrence Selden, Carry Fisher exists on a "threshold" of sorts, but a more tenuous threshold because she is a woman. Selden can participate in high society as he pleases, without penalty if he chooses not to participate for long periods of time. Carry Fisher, a single mother without other resources at her disposal, must participate all the more fiercely to make ends meet. Mrs. Trenor seems to have a grudging respect for this, stating to Lily, "It's rather clever of her to have made a specialty of devoting herself to dull people—the field is such a large one, and she has it

practically to herself. She finds compensations, no doubt—I know she borrows money of Gus—but they I'd *pay* her to keep him in good humor, so I can't complain, after all" (38-9). Mrs. Trenor is condescending, to be sure, but acknowledges Carry Fisher's place in the pecking order as legitimate.

The scene by the fire in Mrs. Fisher's home is notable in that Mrs. Fisher's young daughter is juxtaposed with Simon Rosedale, who is also visiting. At this point in the story, Lily has turned down Rosedale's offer of marriage a year or more ago, but is now reconsidering the pursuit of him as a husband—a calculated move to restore her reputation and social standing. Lily is surprised to find Rosedale as a fellow guest at Mrs. Fisher's home, and observes him with her daughter, playing by the fire. Wharton describes the child, in Lily's perception, as a "small critical creature," rather than a "person" (215). Her descriptions of Rosedale are also telling of her lack of connection with the domestic sphere. She describes him first as "homely" (215). Homeliness implies unattractiveness, and can also imply comfort and coziness, but this possible more positive second meaning is negated by her observations about his manner when playing with the child. Lily continues to observe the pair. Rather than softening her views on Rosedale as a person—as one might expect when finding someone in an unguarded and unobserved moment playing with a small child—she notes merely that he seems "kind in his gross, unscrupulous, rapacious way, the way of a predatory creature with his mate" (215). The grasping nature of the word "rapacious" brings to mind Lily herself, and to perhaps foreshadow the grasping attempt she makes in the next chapter to secure Rosedale in marriage, however unattractive he may be to her. And it is clear that he *is* repellent: in the final sentence of the paragraph where she observes the pair, she describes him as "florid and dominant" (215). "Florid" refers literally to Rosedale's flushed

face and is consistent with how he is described throughout the book, but also to his flamboyance as “new money.” Though resigning herself to a plan to approach Rosedale for marriage, Lily is repelled by him, even after she sees him exhibiting kindness to a child in a domestic setting. Lily is attracted to beauty and ease, not to kindness and domesticity. She is unable to enter into the domestic scene here: indeed, her arrival ends the interaction.

That Lily refers to both the child and Rosedale as a “creature” in the same paragraph is not accidental. The word “creature” is defined as “an animal, as distinct from a human being,” as well as “a fictional or imaginary being, typically a frightening one.” Both might be apt to describe Lily’s relationship to domesticity. That the child is a “creature” implies that Lily sees her as less than a person, and perhaps even something frightening, of which she has no understanding. Rosedale fits both of these definitions as well, and the word “dominant” in his description in this scene is also telling. Lily sees him as not a human, but a frightening (or at least repellent) beast, both predatory and in control of both the space and the situation. Recognizing Rosedale as “dominant” automatically relegates herself and the child to the opposite status: submissive, and resigned to react to Rosedale’s actions.

Referring to the child as a “creature” here also helps us refine the larger picture of how children are viewed in Lily’s upper-crust world. Children problematize the economics of the family unit as a business arrangement because they fall outside of the cycle of consumption it espouses. While an inevitable by-product of a marriage, children are unaccounted for by the system—and indeed, are seemingly discouraged. At all the events and parties Lily attends throughout the novel, only Carry Fisher’s child makes an appearance, and only while Carry is “off-duty” and entertaining at her own modest rental home between the trips and engagements with the wealthy set that are her financial lifeblood. Any other

children that the various wealthy couples might have are safely tucked away—presumably because they can afford to pass off these inconvenient accessories to nannies, keeping them out of the way until they are old enough to participate in the system themselves—like Lily, groomed for marriage. Children fit into neither the social scene nor the domestic sphere as represented by the fine house prepared for display of finery: children are unpredictable, messy “creatures” who might disrupt the order of the adult gatherings, and so are removed.

The tension between the domestic and the social spheres in which these women travel is perhaps best exemplified in Lily’s host. Mrs. Fisher’s self-elected occupation of acting as a social manager for the more privileged members of their set is not without a price. It is implied that she has very little time available to spend with her daughter due to her social obligations with the families she services. It is made clear that the child is not welcome at Mrs. Fisher’s “workplaces,” and the baggage of the child must be shipped elsewhere. Like Lily, Mrs. Fisher occupies a lower rung in the pecking order of New York society—someone who must work hard to ensure her continued acceptance into that order. It is not disclosed where she sends her daughter when she is traveling with her employers, but Mrs. Fisher confides to Lily over a cigarette on the evening of her visit that “It’s such a blessing to have a few quiet weeks with the baby” (216). It is implied that Mrs. Fisher would like to exist in the familial sphere as fully as she participates in the social one. Lily notes that “Carry, in her rare moments of prosperity, because so expansively maternal that Miss Bart sometimes wondered whether, if she could ever get time and money enough, she would not end by devoting them both to her daughter” (216). Mrs. Fisher, however, is obliged to put love of her daughter on the back burner when financial reality comes knocking. Even non-traditional family units—

those comprised of a different configuration of members than a husband/wife and any offspring they might produce—are at risk in this social system.

The discussion of a mother's devotion to her daughter brings us back around to the other early example of maternal devotion in the novel: Mrs. Bart's literal devotion of her time and resources to groom Lily to marry well and achieve wealth. Carry Fisher behaves almost "maternally" to Lily in the same way—over the same cigarette, she advises Lily on how to turn her fortunes around in the wake of her social disgrace at Bertha Dorset's hand: "I believe you can marry George Dorset tomorrow; but if you don't care for that particular form of retaliation, the only thing to save you from Bertha is to marry someone else" (217-8). This comes on the heels of Carry's lament that she rarely gets to see her daughter: she acknowledges this, then gamely jumps back into the whirl of intrigue she must navigate to stay financially afloat.

Those on the outer reaches of the social set are more able to see it for what it is: a cycle of consumption. Carson notes that Lily "knows that she is an insider in the world of the leisured class, but she also knows that she is an intruder" (381) Both Carry and Lily occupy this status, and it's noted of Mrs. Fisher "that, while she actively gleaned her own stores from the fields of affluence, her real sympathies were on the other side—with the unlucky, the unpopular, the unsuccessful, with all her hungry fellow-toilers in the shorn stubble of success" (215) This does not make it any easier for them to leave it, however. Coulombe notes that Mrs. Fisher is one character who serves to "help Lily gain access to a materialistic and reductive society" (3).

### Nettie Struther's Baby

Lily's other interaction with a mother/daughter pair occurs later in the novel, and also takes place in front of a fire, but differs greatly from her time spent with Carry Fisher and her daughter.

On the day of her death, Lily is walking back to her boardinghouse from her job in the millinery shop, when she meets Nettie Struther, who initially hails her in concern before recognizing her: "Excuse me—are you sick—?—Why, it's Miss Bart!" (268). Nettie remembers Lily from her stint doing charity at the working girls' club because Lily sponsored her trip to a sanatorium in the mountains when she fell ill. Since the last time they met, Nettie has married and had a baby girl, and she enthusiastically invites Lily to her home to rest and warm up before continuing on her way. Lily mostly sits quietly in Nettie's kitchen, listening to Nettie update her on her life, and watching her feed the baby. Nettie notes that "I never thought I'd get married, you know, and I'd never have had the heart to go on working just for myself" (271). Eventually, Lily accepts the baby from Nettie to hold.

This scene is a departure from Lily's earlier observation of Carry Fisher's daughter. Here, rather than a "creature," Nettie's daughter is referred to as "the baby" or "she" or, once, by her mother, by her name, "Marry Anto'nette—that's what we call her; after the French queen in that play at the Garden—I told George the actress reminded me of you, and that made me fancy the name" (270-1). The child is acknowledged in personhood, given a gender, and interacted with directly, rather than merely observed. That leads us to the question of what has changed, and what makes this child a person in Lily's perception, while the upper-class child in the earlier scene is a "creature."

The issue of class must be considered here. In *Edith Wharton's Argument with America*, Elizabeth Ammons notes that, regardless of station or social class, "All of [the women in *The House of Mirth*] have one thing in common: dependence on Wall Street" (39). This may be true from a global standpoint, but the extent to which this observation extends to female children as well depends upon class. Nettie Struther is an office-girl, and her husband is a motor-man who works the night shift. These characters are solidly lower-middle to lower class. They lack the resources available to upper-class families—or even to lower-rung socialites like Carry Fisher—such as servants to help with child-rearing and economic advantages of owning or renting their own house. By necessity, the child must remain with her parents most of the time. It could be assumed that children, to the working class, would be considered even more to be "baggage" than by the upper classes—but this does not appear to be the case. Rather than being viewed as an accessory or nuisance to be shunted away from the core family unit of husband and wife whenever possible, Nettie's daughter is central to the family unit: an important component rather than an inconvenient by-product. Rather than observing the child coldly as she does in the earlier scene, Lily holds the baby and is struck by "the surprised sense of human fellowship" that the encounter with Nettie and her daughter brings (272). After years of shallow friendships and games of intrigue in the social circle of the upper crust, this encounter represents for Lily a moment of legitimate human connection—something that has been conspicuously absent in her encounters with nearly all the other characters in the book. Rather than calculating, gauging her next move, and strategically maneuvering through social interactions, as she has been trained to do, she experiences kindness and nurturing. This foray into the domestic sphere is no less foreign to Lily than when she observed Carry Fisher's daughter with Rosedale by the fire—and she

certainly is not overcome by a sudden desire to *be* a mother herself—but this time her consciousness is raised to what is missing from the world she usually inhabits: sincere human connection.

Lily reflects on this back at the boardinghouse: “...as she looked back she saw that there had never been a time when she had had any real relation to life. Her parents too had been rootless, blown hither and thither on every wind of fashion, without any personal existence to shelter them from its shifting gusts” (274). She recognizes more clearly, by seeing a family unit outside of the “business model” so prevalent in the closed system of the upper class, that “All the men and women she knew were like atoms whirling away from each other in some wild centrifugal dance: her first glimpse of the continuity of life had come to her that evening in Nettie Struther’s kitchen” (275).

This implies that futurity, too, lies outside of that constrictive social system. Children are a way to move a society’s values and beliefs forward into the next generation: for one set of people to perpetuate themselves. Lily’s childless upper-class friends rely on the capitalist system to move their values forward for them: survival of the family is based not on who has the most children or how they are reared, but in how wealth is distributed. When Lily’s wealthy relative Mrs. Penniston dies, much is made of how her wealth is divided and to whom it is allocated: money decides which families will prosper and last into the next generation, and which will die out. Futurity for the upper class depends upon deft marital arrangements, with people as human capital, and distribution of wealth. But for lower class families—like Nettie and her husband—futurity takes the form of human beings instead.



## Conclusions

The meaning of the end of *The House of Mirth*, where Lily dies “holding to her breast a fantasy infant daughter she invented out of her vision of Nettie Struther’s motherhood,” has been debated widely among critics (Ammons 376). Elizabeth Ammons interprets it in “Edith Wharton and the Issue of Race” as a “final vision of Lily as virgin white mother” (376). Some critics view the end of the novel and Lily’s death as a tragedy; some, as a triumph of feminism, wherein “Lily’s feminist consciousness [is] awakened” (Carson 381). She dies rather than continue to participate in the system that has drained her.

McEntyre notes that “Money drives both those who have it and those who don’t to betray themselves, suppress their deepest needs, and defer their most authentic desires in the worship of false gods” (McEntyre 386). The higher in the social order Wharton’s characters are, the less likely they are to have (visible) children. The high-society kings and queens represented by the Trenors and the Dorsets have no children. The Seldens and the Barts (couples with grown children) are lower in the social order. Carry Fisher is lower still, and Nettie doesn’t figure into that social system at all.

Ammons notes that many of Wharton’s works focus on a critique of “conspicuous consumption in the leisure class, [and] the economics of marriage for white middle-and-upper-class women” (“Preface” xi). By giving children only to lower-class characters like the Struthers and Carry Fisher, Wharton implies that futurity lies not within the capitalist system that supports the “family business model,” but outside of it, in the realm of human connection. For Lily, raised to thrive only in the system of the family unit as business model, the realization of this comes too late, but others may be more fortunate.

**CHAPTER 4. “STUCK IN THE PATTERN”: THE CREATING/REPRODUCING  
MOTHER IN CHARLOTTE PERKINS GILMAN’S “THE YELLOW WALL-  
PAPER,” SUSAN GLASPELL’S *THE VERGE*, AND PAMELA ZOLINE’S “THE  
HEAT DEATH OF THE UNIVERSE”**

**Introduction**

In 1892, Charlotte Perkins Gilman published the now-iconic and frequently anthologized Gothic short story “The Yellow Wall-Paper,” the narrative of a young mother’s mental breakdown as a result her physician-husband’s prescribed “rest cure.” But the story also offers insight into the issue of feminine identity—specifically, the difficulty the unnamed first-person narrator faces in reconciling individuality with middle-class motherhood, and the creation of intellectual/artistic work with the demands of reproduction and the smothering nature of a male-constructed environment.

In the years since this story’s publication, literature has seen this storyline revisited by numerous female writers, and across genre lines—notably, as I will discuss in this article, in Susan Glaspell’s 1921 play *The Verge* and in Pamela Zoline’s 1967 science-fiction short story “The Heat Death of the Universe.” Through a discussion of the three works’ similarities of story arc, their use of structure and language, their portrayal of various family members (mothers, fathers, and children), the tension between physical space and intellectual space, and their handling of issues of identity, I will argue that the repeated reemergence of this narrative arc indicates that the conversation surrounding the creating/reproducing mother figure is one of continued validity—and that, despite the many advancements of feminism, women are still taking down the yellow wallpaper.

### **Gilman, Glaspell, and Zoline: Narrative Similarities**

The mothers represented in all three of these works come from a very specific subset of motherhood: all three are white, married, upper-middle-class, heterosexual, and well-educated. This distinction necessarily limits the scope of these works' significance to a focus on the issues of patriarchal control within that subset, and cannot be said to be of universal significance for all women. Issues facing mothers who are non-white, less-educated, queer, single, and/or coming from a less-privileged background are not considered.

All three main characters struggle with the reconciliation of their stations as mothers and wives, and the expectations adherent to these stations, with their own wishes to produce creative or intellectual work; all are pushed to a breakdown by the narrative's end. The unnamed first-person narrator in "The Yellow Wall-paper" is a young mother. She has been (as Gilman herself was) diagnosed by the experts of her day with "temporary nervous depression—a slight hysterical tendency" (Gilman 658). The prescribed remedy for this malady is a regimen of rest and confinement at an old rented summer-house in the country, where the narrator is "absolutely forbidden to 'work'" (Gilman 658). The narrator disagrees with this on principle, as she enjoys writing, but submits to the cure anyway, writing only in secret. Her husband confines her to a former nurse's room on the upper level of their summer home. She becomes obsessed with the ugly yellow wallpaper in her room, losing herself in the patterns, eventually imagining that she can see a woman trapped in the pattern. As her account progresses, her obsession with the wallpaper grows, until finally she locks her husband out of her room, tears the paper off the walls, and believes that she *is* the woman in the wallpaper.

Iowa-born Greenwich Village playwright Susan Glaspell's play *The Verge* reinvents Gilman's story arc in a post-World War I context. The main character is a woman named Claire Archer who experiments with plants, attempting to produce plants that can, as she puts it, "Explode their species," taking a new form entirely (Glaspell 70). As the play opens, Claire has funneled all the heat from the house to her greenhouse laboratory to keep the plants at a steady temperature; and her husband and two houseguests, as well as the maid, have invaded that space in search of heat and breakfast. C.W.E. Bigsby describes *The Verge* as "...a play of witty social observation [that] quickly shifts its ground. The result is a work which is challenging in the demands which it makes on producers and designers no less than on audiences" (19). Claire has one grown daughter, Elizabeth, in whom she takes no interest. As the play goes on, Claire alienates herself from her family more and more markedly, withdrawing into her horticultural experiments as one particularly promising new plant, the Breath of Life, nears fruition. Claire's focus on her experiments is complicated by the presence of Elizabeth; her husband Harry, who "wishes that she would restrict herself to creating flowers that were 'as good as possible of their kind;'" his friends Tom (Claire's former lover) and Dick (an artist); and her sister Adelaide, who reprimands her for putting her academic interests ahead of her role as a mother (Bigsby 22). The play culminates in the failure of the Breath of Life to attain the form for which Claire had hoped. She unhinges mentally, much like Gilman's narrator, but goes one step farther: rather than merely locking out the men, Claire kills Tom in her breakdown.

Pamela Zoline's "The Heat Death of the Universe" focuses on Sarah Boyle, a mid-century suburban housewife. Her mundane daily duties are presented in numbered paragraphs, interspersed with "Inserts" discussing entropy and the laws of thermodynamics,

warning that “a time must finally come when the Universe ‘unwinds’ itself, no energy being available for use. This state is referred to as the ‘heat death of the Universe’” (Zoline 420).

What begins as a pleasant-seeming account of Sarah’s domestic life—in paragraph 9, Sarah is described as “a vivacious and intelligent young wife and mother, educated at a fine Eastern college, proud of her growing family, which keeps her busy and happy around the house”—takes on darker tones as the narrative proceeds (Zoline 418). Sarah obsessively counts, labels, and categorizes the objects around her, imagines her children dying of cancer caused by sugary cereals, and dreams of what she might have done instead of being a mother. She has dreams “of heroic girth” rooted in musical, scientific, or artistic achievement—until she slips back into her role of mother (Zoline 426). Mundane events—a visit from her mother-in-law, cleaning up after her child’s birthday party—are interspersed with scientific data and information. The story culminates in Sarah’s hysterical meltdown in her kitchen, where she smashes eggs, dishes, and jars of jelly, and cries. Cavalcanti and Haran describe this scene as one “that successfully effects a stop in the time movement toward the future. And because those are the story’s final lines, readers are left with such a frozen image—one may even expect the action to start unwinding, or moving backwards” (184). This description refers to “Heat Death,” but could describe the end of *The Verge* or “The Yellow Wall-Paper” as well.

### **Structure and Language**

All three authors make use of disjointed narrative structures to tell their stories. Gilman’s first-person narrator tells her story in journal form, writing when her husband isn’t supervising her. What begins as a fairly straightforward narrative at the story’s beginning becomes disjointed and manic by the end, with gaps in the narrative (as between journal entries). Zoline’s numbered sections and “Inserts” serve as a non-traditional narrative format

as well, breaking up the story and preventing it from being a chronological narrative. Mary Papke notes that “the narrative is...fragmented (literally so on the page) and the ‘story’ comprises a puzzling mixture of scientific discourse, domestic fiction, and direct address to the reader; in short, it refuses easy interpretation” (150).

Glaspell’s use of disjointedness comes less from her narrative structure than from Claire’s speech, which is often broken and interspersed with dashes, as when, in Act I, she describes the significance her horticultural experiments hold, and how her plants change with her guidance: “Something in them knows they’re shut in to just that. So—go mad—that life may not be prisoned. Break themselves up into crazy things—into lesser things, and from the pieces—may come one sliver of life with vitality to find the future. How beautiful. How brave” (Glaspell 70). Bigsby notes that “It is almost as if, to Claire, the regularities of grammar, the coherences hinted at by linguistic structure, themselves imply a repressive order” (23).

### **Male Characters**

In “The Yellow Wall-paper” and “Heat Death,” the women’s husbands—presumably the ones who created (or at least contributed to) the repressive environments in which the women spend their days, and the ones who maintain them—are conspicuously absent. Sarah Boyle’s husband is never named, and we never see him in the story, although we do meet his mother, which shows us that Sarah is not a single mother. Gilman’s narrator is married to a physician named John, who is concerned but often away due to the demands of his profession. As the narrative progresses, the narrator grows more and more suspicious of John, and finally discounts his wishes altogether, essentially banishing his influence from her narrative.

*The Verge* differs somewhat on this matter: the play's male roster contains not one but three men—Tom, Dick, and Harry—to balance Claire. While Gilman's narrator and Sarah Boyle are confined to the domestic spaces and actions designated/provided by their respective husbands, Claire claims more agency. The home she lives in with Harry (in which Tom and Dick are houseguests) is one that contains two spaces she claims as her own: the greenhouse where her horticultural experiments are housed, and what she calls the "Thwarted Tower," an upper room that she uses as a place to be alone (a contrast to Gilman's narrator, who is, in effect, confined to a tower). Duneer notes, however, that "neither her room in the tower, nor her workspace in the greenhouse is quite the 'room of one's own' that Virginia Woolf envisions. Despite her attempts at locking the other characters out, they continually invade her space" (47). Rather than serving as absentee enforcers of the kinds of activities the woman "should" be doing (as in "Wall-paper" and "Heat Death"), the men in *The Verge* actively lobby for domesticity, invading Claire's private sanctums and attempting to "reconvert [them] into a domestic space," as in the opening scene, when the three men move the breakfast table to the greenhouse (Duneer 47).

The men's attitudes toward Claire's work are also different from those espoused or implied by Gilman and Zoline. The husband of Gilman's narrator specifically forbids her writing. It is implied that Sarah Boyle's creative work never manifests due to her all-consuming role as mother and caregiver—and while her husband never manifests in the story to enforce this, Sarah self-polices based on what she perceives to be her primary role in the family dynamic. In *The Verge*, however, the men serve as intellectual impediments much as they serve as physical ones. They are tolerant of her experiments, but worry that she is becoming too obsessed with them, and taking them too far. The men talk between themselves

and, much like Gilman's narrator's physician husband, diagnose: "Can't you see she's troubled?" Tom says to Claire's husband Harry at one point (Glaspell 71). Harry, for his part, casually remarks of Claire's activities: "That's an awfully nice thing for a woman to do, raise flowers—" a nurturing activity that differs from Claire's experimental work of "seeking to transcend her social, and, indeed, biologic role" (Bigsby 22).

### **Disappointing Offspring**

That nurturing biologic role, of course, is that of "mother." Each of the main characters are markedly detached from their children. It is stated more than once in "Heat Death" that "Sarah can hardly remember how many cute chubby little children she has" (Zoline 425), even though she has categorized and counted all the inanimate objects in her living room. She notes that the children make "incessant demands for breast, time, milk of many sorts" (Zoline 427). She sees her children as consumers. She even refers to them as "the patchy and too often disappointing vegetables of one's own womb" (423). The word choice here is telling. Offspring are more often referred to as the "fruits" of one's womb: fruits have seeds, and therefore potential for growth. Vegetables, on the other hand, connote a more negative image: that of a vegetative state, where mental activity and growth are flatlined—rendering the individual as merely a mouth to be fed and kept alive, living to consume.

Gilman's narrator has a baby, which she mentions with detached affection, referring to him offhand: "Such a dear baby! And yet I *cannot* be with him, it makes me so nervous" (Gilman 660). Care of the child is relegated to a nursemaid during the narrator's "rest cure." Duneer notes that "With a nurse to take care of her baby and a husband to do her thinking for



her, Gilman's narrator's role as mother (if her husband had his way) would be reduced to little more than a machine for reproduction" (42).

In *The Verge* Claire's daughter Elizabeth "is a disturbing reminder for Claire of the difference between reproduction and creation" (Duneer 48). Elizabeth has recently arrived from boarding school, and Claire notes that "She has been, as they quaintly say, educated: prepared for her place in life" (Glaspell 70). Claire finds it impossible to relate to Elizabeth, or to explain the significance of her horticultural experiments to her, and makes no real attempt to do so. Near the beginning of Act II, Claire's sister Adelaide reprimands her: "A mother cannot cast off her own child simply because she does not interest her?" Claire promptly fires back, "Why can't she?" The dialogue continues:

Adelaide: "Because it would be monstrous!"

Claire: "And why can't she be monstrous—if she has to be?"

Adelaide: "You don't have to be. That's where I'm out of patience with you, Claire. You are really a particularly intelligent, competent person, and it's time for you to call a halt to this nonsense and be the woman you were meant to be!"

Claire: "What inside dope have you on what I was meant to be?"

Adelaide: "I know where you came from."

Claire: "Well, isn't it about time somebody got loose from that?" (79-80)

For these characters, motherhood is a hard pill to swallow—as if, in creating children and being expected to care for them, they are forced to forfeit their own creative (but not reproductive) "work." For Gilman's narrator, this takes the form of writing. Sarah Boyle has the benefit of her college education, and while her chosen professional field is not specifically discussed, she has aspirations and interest in both the arts and sciences. Claire

proceeds with her experiments but is constantly impeded by her family and friends and urged to behave in a more “motherly” way. These characters feel trapped by their roles as mothers—and it is interesting to note that Gilman’s narrator is confined to a literal nursery.

### **Physical Environment**

This brings us to a discussion of the physical environments depicted in the works. All three women inhabit a family home, but the home is a sphere constructed and tainted by patriarchal influence. A sense of artificiality, enclosure, and detachment from the world outside pervade all three narratives, countering the comfortable idea of the home/mother: as Downey notes, “a pleasant environment, and a pretty woman to oversee it, might actually produce not an ordered and morally uplifting home life, but financial ruin, violence, and even death.” (131)

Gilman’s narrator is surrounded by unnatural color, in the form of the titular yellow wall-paper, which she describes as “a smouldering unclean yellow” (Gilman 659). The maid notes that the wallpaper leaves a residue on anything it touches, and that the narrator should be more careful, hinting that the wallpaper is tainting her. Visually, the wallpaper “commit[s] every artistic sin” and is a manmade monstrosity (Gilman 659).

In “Heat Death,” Sarah Boyle is surrounded by manmade substances and unnatural shades of color, as when she cleans “the yellow-marbled formica table with a blue synthetic sponge” (Zoline 418). She notes the lurid colors on the cereal boxes, the coldness and cheapness of the lights in the grocery store, and the bright frosting colors on the birthday child’s cake. The blue of her eyes is equated to the blue of her cleaning sponge: “a fine, modern, acid, synthetic blue” (Zoline 421). This suggests that the artificiality of her environment is beginning to seep into her. Papke notes that “this period saw the rise of

suburbia and the megacities, intense commercialization touching every aspect of a person's life, and the mass production of goods and a new mass society taught to want those goods" (151). Duneer notes a parallel idea linking Gilman and Glaspell: "Claire, and even the narrator of "The Yellow Wallpaper," can be seen as fighting similar battles for individualism in a world dying from boredom" (26).

All three women experience detachment from the world outside the home. The entire narrative of *The Verge* plays out in Claire's and Harry's family home. Gilman's narrator can see from her window that "There is a *delicious* garden! I have never seen such a garden—large and shady, full of box-bordered paths, and lined with long grape-covered arbors with seats under them" (658). Confined to her upper room, however, she is unable to access the outdoors. "Heat Death's" twelfth numbered paragraph indicates a similar detachment, but takes it one step farther. Sarah Boyle imagines the whole world becoming like the California where she lives, and describes her landscape in terms a woman's body, "all topographical imperfections sanded away with the sweet-smelling burr of the plastic surgeon's cosmetic polisher; a world populace dieting, leisured, similar in pink and mauve hair and rhinestone shades" (418). She even describes the land as "brassiered and girdled" by freeways and other manmade structures: the female body made over to suit men.

Likewise, seemingly welcoming interior environments become more and more threatening: Sarah's pleasant suburban home devolves into "a jungle filled with dirty pans and the roaring of giant stuffed toy animals suddenly turned savage" (Zoline 424). "The Yellow Wall-Paper's" summer-house in the country likewise becomes creepy and forbidding as the wallpaper seemingly takes on a life of its own. Claire's "Thwarted Tower" is described in the stage directions at the beginning of Act II as "a tower which is thought to be round, but

does not complete the circle...The whole structure is as if given a twist by some terrific force—like something wrong” (Glaspell 78). These narratives take place almost fully within the confines of a domestic space—but not a space which is welcoming or safe. The one exception to this is Sarah Boyle’s trip to the grocery store: a feminized space outside of the home, a space “approved” for women. This outing is not an escape, but rather an extension of her domestic oppression.

### **Identity and Choice**

The issue of the choice to become a mother must be considered. It might be argued in the case of Gilman’s narrator that the social forces of the *fin de siècle* era left her with few good options for a life outside of domesticity and motherhood—yet it is clear that her intellectual identity is of higher priority to her than her identity as a mother (even if it is not important to anyone else in the story). Claire Archer is supported in her intellectual endeavors by her husband (at least to a point), but is repeatedly dragged back to domesticity by the other characters in the play. And Sarah Boyle, as a product of the mid-twentieth century, presumably made a more conscious choice to become a wife and mother after completing her education, rather than to pursue a professional or artistic career outside of the home. As Sarah laments, “...there are things to be hoped for, accomplishments to be desired beyond the mere reproductions, mirror reproductions of one’s kind” (Zoline 423). Claire reverses this order: having produced the disappointing Elizabeth, she has moved on to focus her work on ideas that transcend the reproduction of one’s self (or the failure inherent to doing so). As Bigsby notes, “Life for Claire is the discovery of new ideas that have not yet been imagined” (48). In all three cases, the women struggle to bridge or balance their potential for creation with the often-overpowering social identity of the mother.

Hewitt cites the scene in “Heat Death” with Sarah’s mother-in-law as an example of the problem of identity. In this scene, the mother-in-law discusses her neighbor, who has cancer and is fading quickly from the healthy, active individual she was before her illness: “When I visited her, she hardly *knew* me, can hardly *speak*, can’t keep herself *clean*, says Mrs. David Boyle.” (42) The woman’s identity has shifted, making her something unknowable to the outside observer. “According to this formulation,” Hewitt proposes, “knowledge, speech, and cleanliness are commensurate—cleaning is the only means of preventing the wasting away of both body and mind” (295). Cleaning is Sarah’s primary activity: there are three numbered sections entitled “CLEANING UP THE HOUSE,” and several others involving cleaning specific parts of the house, or how cleaning was avoided. Paragraph 22 is entitled “AT LUNCH ONLY ONE GLASS OF MILK IS SPILLED” and contains only one sentence: “At lunch only one glass of milk is spilled” (421). This continued focus on cleaning makes up Sarah’s day: she cleans, and she thinks—until something new to clean presents itself. Hewitt notes that “...when one’s identity is founded in cleaning, making messes is apocalyptic. Like her mother-in-law’s neighbor, Sarah is wasting away—she is becoming detritus—her identity fractured like the scattered dishes on the floor” (295).

Glaspell’s Claire puts this in another way, remarking that “‘It’s hard to—get past what we’ve done. Our own dead things—block the way’” (qtd. Bigsby 21). Duneer notes that “The ‘dead stuff’ in the path is all the trivial clutter that Harry, Adalaide, and Elizabeth take for life, and which they try to ‘pile up’ in front of Claire to obscure her vision and surround her with their close mindedness. Their mindless blathering reveals their unquestioning acceptance of conventionality” (48). Gilman’s narrator, who has servants to clean the house for her, nevertheless engages in tearing down the wallpaper in her room, which can be read

as a form of cleaning similar to Claire's wish to remove the "dead stuff" of social expectation.

The women attempt to impose order on their constructed environments—to insert themselves into them in a meaningful way. Duneer describes this as being "haunted by 'patterns' of con-*formity*. Each tries to break through social constraints by imagining possibilities of escape from conventional forms" (50). Claire experiments with her plants, searching for "a form that hasn't been" (Duneer 50). Sarah does this through the frantic notes and reminders she leaves throughout the house for herself. Even the structure of the text itself creates tension, as the numbered paragraphs impose artificial order on the reading experience—at once organized and disjointed. Gilman's narrator interacts mentally with the pattern in the wallpaper, allowing it to take structure in her mind: "There are things in that paper that nobody knows but me, or ever will. Behind that outside pattern the dim shapes get clearer every day. It is always the same shape, only very numerous. And it is like a woman stooping down and creeping about behind the pattern" (663) These women attempt to co-opt the masculine environments where they live, to subvert them to a female narrative, Sarah by her numbering and ordering of the manmade objects in her home, and Gilman's narrator by her forays "into" the wallpaper, and Claire through her experiments. They may as well be leaving the note that Sarah leaves for herself over the stove in the kitchen: "Help, Help, Help, Help, Help" (419). As Joanna Russ notes in "The Image of Woman in Science Fiction," "In short, masculinity equals power and femininity equals powerlessness" (203)

For these characters, these struggles end in actions "unacceptable" for a nurturing mother figure: meltdowns that could be construed as insanity, but are the logical conclusion to their confined existences, and the products of the unsuccessful integration of their own

needs into the male narrative space. Duneer observes that “Gilman sets the stage for Glaspell by allowing her narrator to ‘creep over’ her husband. Glaspell furthers the revolt by having Claire strangle Tom before he can enclose her” (53). While Sarah Boyle does not injure her husband in any way, Zoline picks up the building blocks that Glaspell and Gilman have provided: Sarah smashes eggs: a clear reproductive metaphor. She symbolically smashes—rejects—her children, or perhaps her continued potential for motherhood. The question posed by these narratives is the same: is insanity—or at least illogical, destructive behavior—in fact a sane response to living within a restrictive construct—in this case, motherhood?

Motherhood in these pieces is represented as an enclosing system that does not simultaneously support a woman’s reproductive potential and her intellectual potential. These three characters violently, destructively reject that construct. We can return here to the idea of an identity shaped by the act of cleaning. Sarah Boyle cleans constantly. Gilman’s narrator, while less industrious, also performs an act that might be compared to cleaning throughout the story: she tears off pieces of the wallpaper (though she does not, it is implied though her account of the narrative, remember doing so). She is claiming agency in her space, as Sarah attempts to do in her frantic housekeeping frenzy. Claire, while not literally performing housekeeping tasks, nevertheless reacts to the emotional clutter her family and friends supply, rejecting it. Indeed, the characters’ destructive acts at the end of their stories might be seen as an act of cleaning as well: they resort to “cleaning house” in a more symbolic way, by detaching from the accepted behaviors of their respective situations. The texts leave unanswered the question of how these acts of rejection changes the women’s situations, if at all.

### Critical Reception

All three of these works proved difficult for critics to categorize, and met with mixed reception in their respective time periods. “The Yellow Wall-paper” was seen as disturbing and dangerous by some. One contemporary physician is famously quoted as saying that to read it would be sufficient to drive a reader to madness (Arajuo 7). Other audiences, more dismissive, “greeted it as an amusing horror story” (Arajuo 7). Gilman later wrote, in response to the outcry against her story, that she wrote it after having been prescribed a “rest cure” for depression (similar to her narrator’s experience), in the hopes that it would discourage others from subjecting their family members to a similar treatment: “It was not intended to drive people crazy, but to save people from being driven crazy, and it worked.” (Gilman 670)

“The Heat Death of the Universe” was similarly difficult to pigeonhole: it was originally published in *New Worlds* science fiction magazine, but it has been debated whether it is truly a work of science fiction due to its deviation from the traditional narrative structure of the genre. Elizabeth Hewitt examines the debate whether it is true science fiction, or merely using “‘science’ as analogy for ‘real world.’ In such a reading, Zoline’s insertion of thermodynamic theories would be merely a metaphoric vehicle for describing the chaos of an individual woman’s life.” (290)

In the case of *The Verge*, reviews were also mixed after its initial performance by the Provincetown Players in New York. In a review in the *New York Evening Telegraph*, Weed Dickinson dismissed the play as a “Bad Insanity Clinic” and noted that “Nothing pleases the merry, merry Greenwich Villagers so much as a well misdirected idea which nobody quite understands” (qtd. Bach 19). J.F. Holms, writing in *The New Statesman*, was more specific,



calling the play “a pretentious travesty of emotion and truth” and observing that “*The Verge*...is written, unfortunately, by a woman in deadly earnest...Nonsense has its own merits, and it is precisely because Miss Glaspell’s theme and ideas, as such, bear some imaginable relation to reality, that her play is intolerable” (qtd. Bach 20). Stark Young in *New Republic*, however, defended the play’s experimental nature: “Such a play is an experiment, and nobody can expect it to spring full blown and perfect from the author’s forehead. Prattling about new forms in the theatre and then fighting any attempt at new material is a poor game” (qtd. Bach 24). However, most critics were more closely aligned with Robert A. Parker, who wrote in the *Independent* that “If it was Miss Glaspell’s intention to satirize the type of erotic, neurotic, ill-tempered, and platitudinous hussy who dramatizes herself into a ‘superwoman’ and even ‘puts it over’ on her gentlemen friends...she has admirably succeeded” (qtd. Bach 22). Like Parker’s, many of the negative reviews criticized the character of Claire specifically, labeling her as unconvincing or simply insane.

It may be argued that these works were misunderstood simply because they present a different approach to narrative in the face of traditional, male-dominated literary structures. It is also worth noting that none of these authors were working within the realm of high literature. Gilman’s story fits into the mode of the gothic tale, often a vehicle for lighter entertainment. *The Verge*, as noted previously, was a fringe production geared toward experiment. And Zoline chose to publish her story in a science-fiction magazine, another genre often regarded as less serious.

### **Discussion and Conclusions**

Patriarchal control keeps women of all stations from realizing their full potential—even those who have benefitted most from the advancements made by feminism since the

writing of “The Yellow Wall-Paper” in 1892. As all three of the women depicted are of a privileged white subset—they are economically well-off, educated, and do not suffer physically in their daily lives—it may be easy to dismiss these narratives as the boo-hooing of bored, rich housewives. Papke, however observes of “Heat Death” that “Zoline’s story subtly insists through its meticulous elaboration of the relation between Sarah Boyle’s increasing angst and her reflections on entropy that there is deep social value in defamiliarizing the ‘real’ world of a women who seems to have it made” (14). The same might be said of Gilman’s and Glaspell’s characters. If this privileged subset is disadvantaged (despite all its obvious outward advantages), problems persist, though in perhaps a less-obvious guise: intellectual oppression, rather than physical. Duneer comments of *The Verge* that even “Situating in the historical heyday of American modernism and feminism, Glaspell’s play suggests that the female artists of the 1920s had not yet completely escaped from their metaphorical attics” (36).

The Gothic mode—evident in the storytelling of both Gilman and Glaspell—depicts characters haunted by the past, while science-fiction looks toward the future. The recurring storyline of these three works balances these two ideas: while conditions were much more difficult for women artists before the upheavals of the early twentieth century, work still needed to be done. By 1967, it is reasonable to assume that “...Zoline’s story was perhaps influenced by second-wave feminism. First-wave feminism focused on women’s suffrage at the turn of the twentieth century; this new second wave focused its attention in turn on the social devaluation of women and the work they do” (Papke 145).

Mary Papke observes of “Heat Death” that “Postmodern writing focuses in particular on the failure of grand narratives, stories the majority in a particular place or time believe or

buy into; stories that sustain and console through their ostensible explanation of why we are here and what we should do” (151). If this can be observed of humanity in general, it may be especially true for women, in the wake of the many changes wrought by first- and second-wave feminism over the seventy-five years between the publication of “The Yellow Wallpaper” and the publication of “Heat Death.” In all three works, the “grand narrative” of the nurturing mother is called into question, and we see the struggle of women characters who, in the midst of changing roles and rights for women, attempt to reconcile their choice to become mothers with their desire to be something more than simply a mother—to produce ideas as well as children.

Papke quotes Brooks Landon from his *Science Fiction after 1900* regarding the idea of “science fiction thinking,” noting that it is “not simply genre specific but instead, is ‘a set of attitudes and expectations about the future... a sense of common enterprise... a belief that better thinking is a desirable for goal for humanity’” (qtd. 149). These three pieces all wrestle with this idea in their own ways by having their protagonists struggle to shake off the shackling influence of the past and attempt to move forward into something new.

## CHAPTER 5. CONCLUSION

The texts discussed in this analysis provide insight into the multi-layered tensions of identity faced by middle-to-upper-class mothers at the turn of the twentieth century, and beyond. Gilman's "Giant Wisteria" allows examination of the role of the mother/wife in a gendered family power dynamic, both as complicit in the reinforcement of patriarchal values and as a potential agent for challenge of those values. Wharton's novel *The House of Mirth* expands this discussion beyond the walls of the family home: placing the family unit within the social structures of elite New York society, positioning the mother as pawn and influencer, and positing children as unaccounted for by this system. "The Yellow Wall-Paper" and its reimagining by Glaspell and Zoline bring attention to the creating/reproducing mother beyond the scope of the late nineteenth century, raising the question not only of how to reconcile the gendered role of "mother" with the less-defined role of "artist," but also exploring how women balance these not-necessarily-complementary roles with their own expectations. The common thread in all of these narratives lies in the potential of the mother to move beyond simply "reproducing" to enacting change in both the family and social spheres. These works problematize the role of the mother. They provide contemporary audiences with ways to understand the difficulty of breaking out of an oppressive, entrenched system of gender roles and expectations for those roles, but also provide insight into how mothers might act as agents for changing these same attitudes and beliefs.

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